

Collaborative action to protect South Africa's only endemic parrot



The University of KwaZulu-Natal's Professor Colleen Downs – holder of the South African Research Chair (SARChI) in Ecosystem Health and Biodiversity in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape – is playing a leading role in efforts to conserve South Africa's only endemic parrot. The Cape parrot, *Poicephalus robustus*, was only confirmed as a distinct species in 2017, and its population in the wild is estimated at just 1 800 birds.

Downs is Chair of the Cape Parrot Working Group (CPWG), which was initiated at the university in 1998. In 2019, BirdLife



South Africa appointed the CPWG and the Wild Bird Trust's Cape Parrot Project (CPP) in Hogsback as species guardians for the Cape parrot, and more recently hosted a webinar showcasing their work to date. The CPP's Dr Kate Carstens joined Downs to discuss efforts to

conserve the parrots, such as restoring habitats, establishing community projects and undertaking key research projects.

Downs and Carstens have been driving the implementation of the Cape Parrot and Mistbelt Forest Conservation Action Plan, published in March 2020. They spoke about the major threats to the parrots – categorised as regionally endangered on the Red List of South African Species – while also highlighting the success of initiatives to conserve the birds and their habitats.

Despite its name, the Cape parrot is not confined to the Cape. Its patchy distribution extends from the Amathole mountains of the Eastern Cape to the Karkloof in KwaZulu-Natal, with a relic population in Limpopo's Magoebaskloof and Wolkberg areas, matching the location of the southern mistbelt forests, which are dominated by yellowwoods.

The Cape parrot depends on yellowwoods for food and nesting sites, so it is threatened by fragmentation and loss of these forests. Downs explained that having a strong bill allows the birds to open yellowwood fruit to get to the kernel inside. When these fruits aren't in season, they feed on the fruits and seeds of other plants, such as black wattle, syringa, pecan nut and even proteas. In fact, more than 50 indigenous and alien plant species have been identified as food sources across their range, and the birds may fly more than 100 km in a day on long foraging journeys beyond the forest boundaries.

Umsebenzi we-CPWG nowe-CPP usanda kudingidwa kwiwebhina ebihlelwe yi-BirdLife South Africa, lapho uDkt Kate Carstens wase-CPP ebebambisene noSolwazi Colleen Downs emkhankasweni wokuvikela opholi okubalwa kukhona ukulungisa izindawo zabo, ukusungulwa kwezinhlelo zomphakathi nokwenza imisebenzi yocwaningo emqoka.

Translated by NdabaOnline



The Cape parrot nests in tree cavities, so to encourage breeding the Cape Parrot Project has constructed artificial nest boxes that are being placed in tall trees, usually yellowwoods, in the forest around Hogsback. Nest boxes installed a decade ago were never used by the birds, so these are a new design based on observations of the parrots' nest preferences.



The parrots often travel in small flocks, especially as juveniles, but may gather in very large flocks at pecan orchards when the nuts are in season.



The Cape Parrot Project employs members of the local community to help clear alien vegetation and plant indigenous seedlings to restore forest habitat.

The parrot is a secondary cavity nester, which means it nests in cavities hollowed out in trees – usually tall yellowwoods – by other animals, as well as those resulting from fallen branches, although it will spend time modifying a cavity to its own preferences. For example, deeper cavities may ensure that chicks are beyond the reach of predators, such as African harrier hawks and samango monkeys. Apart from these threats, parrots are vulnerable to human snatchers, as well as diseases.

For more than two decades, the CPWG has hosted an annual Cape Parrot Big Birding Day, in which citizen scientists help count the parrots in different areas so as to estimate the population size of the species. The CPP coordinates the census in the Hogsback area, as just one of many activities involving the local community.



“Using our acronym CPP slightly differently, communities, plants and parrots sums up what we are all about in three words,” said Carstens. “We at the Cape Parrot Project see ourselves as leveraging the Cape parrot as a flagship species to conserve the threatened mistbelt forests and all the species that call these forests their home, while ensuring that local communities derive benefits by partnering with us to restore forest habitat.”

The CPP employs local labourers to clear alien species and plant thousands of indigenous seedlings, which are sourced from community projects established by the project. They are also working on filling key knowledge gaps by conducting research on the species’ nesting sites, demographics and health, identifying critical forest patches, and establishing whether the Cape parrot is successfully adjusting to feeding on exotic species.

Article adapted from a news story by Christine Cuénod, journalist for UKZN's College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science, in NdabaOnline Vol 9 (29).

Images courtesy of Cassie Carstens and other members of the Cape Parrot Project team.

The webinar can be viewed on Birdlife South Africa's YouTube channel, and includes an excellent video about the birds.

Follow Cape Parrot Project on Facebook and Instagram, or see <https://www.wildbirdtrust.com/projects/cape-parrot-project>